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ABSTRACT

This paper is a case study that discusses the creation of a virtual corporation for use in teaching public relations techniques at the University of Tennessee at Martin. It also shows how the structure can be modified for teaching business or finance. A description is given on how to construct and use similar World Wide Web pages. The components are described and their use illustrated. A discussion is also included on the advantages and disadvantages of using the virtual corporation in classroom instruction. (Author/MES)

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INTERACTIVE LEARNING THROUGH CREATION AND USE OF A CYBER CORPORATION WITH APPLICATION IN PUBLIC RELATIONS, BUSINESS, AND FINANCE

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Abstract:
This paper is a case study that discusses the creation of a virtual corporation for use in teaching public relations techniques. It also shows how the structure can be modified for teaching business or finance. A description is given on how to construct and use similar web pages. The components are described and their use illustrated. A discussion is also included on the advantages and disadvantages of using a web in classroom instruction.

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Background
The University of Tennessee at Martin (UTM) is a campus comprised of about 6,000 students. It is part of the University of Tennessee System and is located in West Tennessee in Martin; which is a town of about 10,000 persons. Although the town is very supportive of the University, it does not have a large commercial sector. The largest commercial employers are Goodyear, Tyson, and MTD who have facilities located within a 20-mile radius of Martin. However, the remainder of the industrial base is comprised of small light-production facilities. The economy of the area is largely agricultural.

This community profile makes the teaching of public relations and relating it to practical application particularly challenging, since typical public relations jobs are more closely aligned with metropolitan and commercial endeavors. Forty percent of public relations jobs are found within the corporate structure and another 27 percent of the jobs are found within public relations or marketing firms (Becker, *et al*, 1999). However, UTM does have advantages relative to Internet access availability for students and staff. The campus was one of the first in the state of Tennessee to have all of its buildings including all dormitories wired with fiber optics. Persons working in any of the buildings or living in any of the housing complexes have free Internet access. Availability of this access, linkage to corporate sites, and construction of a virtual corporation would assist in creating a public relations teaching scenario at parity with opportunities available in larger metropolitan centers.

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Introduction

The dominant leaning paradigm of the past and the one that is most frequently encountered today is the one of information transfer. Even when computer technology has been introduced, most often the courses have continued to follow the information transfer paradigm (Bork, 2000). The teacher has been seen as the authority figure and the source of all knowledge. Although some elements of that paradigm exist in the approach taken using the virtual corporation described in this paper, using the virtual corporation as a teaching tool, the teacher becomes more of a guide within the framework of a tutorial teaching paradigm.

Design

Although some persons prefer to design their web documents through line by line writing of hypertext markup language (HTML) and scripting; increasingly people are turning to editing programs because they are easy to use and do not require an extensive knowledge of html. Common examples of these types of programs are FrontPage 2000; DreamWeaver, PageMill, and Hotdog. The author used FrontPage 2000 to design the virtual corporation described in this paper. The program is very easy to use and the tutorial allows even the novice to quickly design pages that will work for almost any classroom application. The web address (url) for the virtual corporation in this case study is http://www.utm.edu/~jhoyer/.

A menu to link design was used for construction of the virtual corporation with the homepage being linked to the remaining support pages and the support pages being linked to each other and the home page. The homepage is designed with college students being the niche audience and as such, some of the interactive elements are chosen based on what would appeal to that audience. The Homepage provides a brief introduction to the web elements by describing what is on the supporting pages and also how to use the web. The support pages include a "How to" page, a Projects page, a photo archive and another page which contains summary narratives of new contracts being won and products being developed within the company.

The "How to" page lists various types of documents which will be generated in the class. The page includes links to cookbook style sheets for each type of document and which describe the format, the use and key points in creating the specific type of document. Additionally, links are provided to examples that have been created and made available to the student and in many cases to actual documents on the web that have been placed on display by various corporations.

The projects page contains descriptions of the various contracts being performed by the virtual corporation. Each profile also contains quotes from personnel and various level managers. The quotes are made available so the student can integrate them into press or product releases, brochures, or any other type of document where a quote or testimonial would be considered appropriate.

The photo archive contains jpegs relating to each of the contracts. The photos can be copied and pasted by the students into news releases, newsletters, product promotional material, an annual report, or any variety of documents the student may construct.

The "What's Happening Around Cyber Corp" page contains narratives about new contracts recently won by the company, new product release information, and in some cases descriptions of awards the company is receiving or giving.

The profile chosen for the virtual corporation was that of an engineering project management company comprised of three divisions: Construction and Maintenance. Commercial and Environmental. The profile was selected because it allows diversity so that students can be exposed to a variety of areas where they are challenged as they work their way through the company to glean the information to complete course assignments. Additionally, such diversity also allows the author to add new contracts throughout the duration of the course in a variety of ways to stimulate student participation and make the experience as close to working within a corporate structure as possible. Contract descriptions themselves came from the author's composite experience of 20 years working for one small business and two major corporations as a proposal manager and senior technical writer. Since the descriptions are composites of several real contracts, they retain the reality required to ensure that the student is exposed to real-world experiences and yet they do not compromise contracts and corporate relationships that actually do exist.

Use

Although a textbook serves as the basis for discussion of course-related elements and for teaching basic public relations writing techniques, what is taught in lecture is actually implemented through assignments related to the virtual corporation. The paragraphs that follow describe the approach that the author has taken in using Cyber CorpÓ, the virtual corporation, to teach public relations writing. Additionally, paragraphs are included which describe what could be done with the virtual corporation to also make it usable to the areas of business and finance.

Public Relations

Beginning with the first class period, the students are introduced to Cyber Corp. They are told that it is an engineering and project management firm that has a corporate headquarters and operates projects in seven states, the Philippines, and the Marshall Islands. In its seven-year existence it has grown in annual revenue from $150,000 to a current contract backlog of $40 million placing it on the INC 500 list of fastest growing companies in the United States. However, the company does not have an internal public affairs department and they have been hired to generate the documents that will ensure the Company continues its healthy growth trend. The students are then shown the homepage of the virtual corporation and an explanation is given on how to use the "How to" section which explains characteristics of the various assignments they will be given and which provides samples of each document to be generated. The students are then given a "tour" of the Cyber CorpÓ and shown the layout and contents so that they will be able to draw from the project descriptions, photo archive and development area to

assimilate the information needed to function as they would within a real internal communications department in a corporation. The initial assignment makes them familiarize themselves with the scope of the Company's activities and design a logo that is used throughout the documentation designed for the Company. During a typical semester, based on the virtual corporation, students write and design the following: a persuasive business letter, a biosketch, a backgrounder, a brochure, news releases, flyers/posters, table toppers, public service announcements, a position paper, an action plan, and the narrative for an annual report.

As the class members progress through the syllabus, they are repeatedly asked to go back into the virtual corporation and based on cyber surfing and "interviews" construct the various documents that are typically generated in a corporate environment.

Finance

The structural design of the virtual corporation as developed earlier in this paper has applicability in the area of finance by adding a few components to create opportunities for costing and spreadsheet maintenance. If the Corporation was being used in the area of finance, the instructor could have the students prepare bid proposals based on the contract scope. By adding material lists, and Department of labor categories and rates, and corporate factors such as overhead, the students could use programs such as Excel or Lotus to cost out individual contracts. Since the contracts vary in size from a few thousand dollars to several million, the instructor could begin with simple "problems" and progress to more difficult ones. The instructor could even make it more challenging by providing only the "core" information from the contracts, and have the individual students make the phone calls needed to carry out item analysis for various components. That would involve students in contacting suppliers and being involved in the financial end of the bid process just as it is carried out in the real world. Additionally, the students could work individually or on teams to compete in identifying ways to cost items more competitively and beat out the competition to win the contract. This approach would not only involve the students actively in learning, it would prepare them to not only know the principles of accounting, but how these principles are applied in day-to-day business.

Business

Since the virtual company is a fairly new start up, a person teaching business could involve the students in developing a 5-year or 10-year business plan (you would have to modify some information here since the company is seven years old in cyber space anyway). Students could also work together to explore ways to expand the current divisions or integrate new ones. They could design capabilities documents for potential clients or investors. The instructor could provide scenarios in which the students would have to present the company's assets to investors or potential clients through PowerPoint presentations. This would involve design of charts and other presentation materials. The instructor could have the students act as marketing teams pitching their ideas in a meeting setting. This would develop the oral presentation skills that are commonly used in this field. In all scenarios, the backdrop for the information could be the corporate profile that exists in Cyber Corp.

Advantages and Disadvantages

There are several advantages to using the virtual corporation in teaching public relations techniques. The same advantages would also apply in most cases in using the virtual corporation in teaching business and finance. Research has shown that instruction via computers results in longer retention of material and in higher test scores compared to the conventional methods (Beerman, 1996). Bork *et al.* (2000) note that computer-based learning is much more individualized, interactive, and accessible for most students. These authors note that students are able to learn at their own pace wherever they are when the teaching is computer based. Another researcher suggests that Internet technologies sharpen knowledge management and collaborative learning skills among students and helps them in problem solving and decision-making (Bates, 2000).

The author of the case study in this paper notes a marked improvement in the quality of work handed in by his students carrying out assignments using the virtual corporation as a basis for assignments compared to similar assignments received from students in classes where situational descriptions were used from a textbook rather than the virtual corporation. Additionally, the students appear to identify more personally with the assignments, express a greater interest in evaluation of their work, and assume more responsibility for correcting any errors before delivering their products for the final critique. Another advantage that exists because of the background described in this paper, is that students at a university in a rural setting are able to experience the internal dynamics of working within a large corporate structure that may not exist in their community and because of that they are better prepared to enter the job market and make the transition successfully once they have completed their training.

There are few disadvantages associated with use of the approach described in this paper when used to support a classroom approach to education. Some authors, however, have identified some disadvantages for students using the Internet solely as a teaching approach without the classroom to support the teaching. These do not relate so much to learning of the content, but to lack of socialization or feelings of isolation (Bork, *et al.*, 2000).

Summary

The use of a virtual corporation for the teaching of public relations techniques can provide an enhanced learning opportunity for students and better prepare them for entry into the real world market place. It may also hold potential for use in the teaching of business and finance. Research supports inclusion of this approach as one way to improve learning. Additionally, with new development tools being made available each day, construction of such teaching devices is within the reach of most educators including those without a highly technical background.

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